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ABSTRACT

Adolescent literature courses in teacher preparation programs should teach novice English teachers how to excite students about reading and how to deal with a constantly changing body of literature. Surveys show that most adolescent literature classes in teacher education programs largely ignore four areas that should be emphasized to better prepare English teachers for these tasks. The first area includes the use of motivational and promotional techniques, such as book talks, storytelling, oral reading, and attractive handouts. The second area is familiarizing prospective teachers with the extensive literature review sources and selections aids available. The third area is the use of non-book materials such as filmstrips, records, cassettes, and videos. The last area is how to teach young adult novels using specific models as guidelines. (AEA)

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WHAT EVERY ADOLESCENT LITERATURE COURSE SHOULD, BUT DOESN'T TEACH

Donald J. Kenney

English teachers' attitudes about literature and literary taste have changed drastically in the last decade and must continue to change to accomodate the fact that not every high school student is going to be an insatiable consumer of Dickens, Thachery, and Conrad.

High school and even college graduates do not go on to read Dickens's Pickwick Papers, or Crime and Punishment as bedside reading. More typically their reading will consist of Ladies Home Journal, Sports Illustrated, and TV Guide, the daily newspaper, and the back of cereal boxes.

What then can English teachers do who have been charged with the duty of instilling the love of books into the lives of students, enriching their lives with the great works of world literature, and last, but not least of all, preparing students to do minimum reading on competency exams? In order to carry out the goal of "turning students on to reading" requires a great deal of motivation and promotion. Do most adolescent literature classes prepare English teachers to meet this challenge? I think not. Based on my observation of English teachers who have come out of good teacher preparation programs, most adolescent literature courses need to devote more time to four aspects of adolescent literature that will better prepare English teachers not only to get students excited about reading but will also give the English teacher a better grasp on an ever changing body of literature. According to a survey of adolescent literature course outlines conducted by Donald Gallo and Marilyn McCaffrey and reported in the Summer 1977 English Education, most adolescent literature courses consisted of extensive readings of young adult books such as Go Ask Alice, Zanballer, and A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich. Students were sometimes required

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to do certain projects such as writing reaction cards, preparing a book talk, or writing biographies of young adult authors. Just to confirm my own views about adolescent literature, I conducted a study of my own. A survey of college catalog course descriptions shows that indeed most adolescent literature classes rarely deal with these four aspects -- 1) motivational and promotional techniques, 2) in-depth coverage of review sources and selection aids of young adult novels, 3) use of related non-book materials, and 4) how to utilize and to teach young adult novels in the classroom. I think if we expect English teachers to fulfill their obligations in turning kids on to reading, courses are needed to prepare them to do this task. These four aspects are important in preparing the English teachers to deal with the increasing problems of getting students excited about reading and literature. Adolescent literature courses are, of course, an important aspect of teacher preparation programs. Adolescent literature courses have changed the attitudes of many perspective English teachers from their superior, elitist attitudes about literature to one of at least acceptance of young adult literature. These courses have gained the respectability of most educators--and even English Departments. It is time then, that adolescent literature courses move further into new dimensions of preparing English teachers. I see the four aspects that I just mentioned as new content emphasis for adolescent literature courses in order for English teachers to continue to turn kids on to reading.

Motivational & Promotional Techniques

First, there are the problems of motivating students to read young adult novels. In the survey I conducted of course descriptions in over 100 college catalogs, I found that only 5 descriptions even mentioned the word promotional. Librarians have long used and developed many

techniques of motivation that English teachers could model their own techniques from. Librarians typically devote a great deal of time to advertising their services and books. The English teachers who value young adult literature somehow think novels about sex, drugs, religious cults, and personal family problems will sell themselves. Both English teachers and librarians are fortunate to have this new body of literature to draw from, and I think it has made our jobs easier to get students to read and to study literature. But it does not sell itself.

In working with English teachers and perspective English teachers, as a librarian I came to realize that most of them seemed inadequately prepared in dealing with the problem of how to make reading books exciting. They didn't really understand how to get kids to read books. They didn't know how to talk to kids about books. They didn't know about the books kids read. They had never read Terry Davis' Vision Quest, All Together Now by Sue Ellen Bridgers, or Susan Cooper's The Grey King or M. E. Kerr's Gentlehands. Too often, the novels read in adolescent literature class remain the sole frame of reference for many teachers. They fail to see or do not take the time to see thay young adult literature is not static but constantly changing. Today's "in-author" is out next year. Last year's drug theme is this year's alcoholism theme as in The Late Great Me by Sandra Scoppettone, or Green's Boy Who Drank Too Much. Consequently, teachers cannot recommend or talk about current books. There are, of course, many techniques that can be used to motivate students to read. The familiar book talk is a prime example and can be varied so frequently that is offers endless ways to talk to students about young adult novels. In my survey, fewer than 5% of the adolescent literature courses teach

this technique. Any number of techniques, or familiarity with these methods could be dealt with in the adolescent literature course. The basic principle of recommending and promoting books is, of course, to read the books. You can't recommend books without reading them -- and this familiarity will enable teachers to do a better job od dealing with kids and recommending books. The art of storytelling, for example talking about survival as in The Ice Hermit, Three Boys in a Cave, and Trouble River could add a new dimension to motivating students to read. Oral reading is another varied technique to use to get students interested in an author, theme, or topic. Numerous books lend themselves to reading a chapter, a scene, or the introductory section to motivate students to read. For example, in Katie Letcher Lyle's Golden Shores of Heaven, one of the funniest incidents that I ever read is described in the "golden cockroach" incident. Wetting the student's appetite is one sure way to build their interest in reading.

English teachers often prepare reading lists, and typically, these are dittoed sheets of the standard purple on white and are handed to the students before a visit to the library. The teacher might also add that two books from the list should be read within the next three weeks. There are two problems with this method. Usually the lack of any enthusiasm or reading guidance about the specific titles on the list and the dreary nature of this typical handout fail to get students excited. How often have you had a class where handout after handout was simply a listing of titles and you received very little guidance in the use of the materials listed? Attractive handouts are both easy to prepare and get the students' attention. However, the teacher's responsibility does not cease with the mere handing out of these lists. Knowing the titles on the list, talking about the books,-- the theme, a character, or even the

author -- will help students formulate some judgements about choosing the right book. The teacher's excitement and enthusiasm about reading and specific books is necessary to convince students of your own genuine concerns for what students read.

Review Sources

The second shortcoming of many adolescent literature courses is the failure to familiarize students with numerous review sources and selection aids. Approximately 36% of those adolescent literature courses I surveyed deal with review sources. On the other hand, 42% of the children's literature courses deal rather extensively with review sources. Now many of you are probably thinking right now that you do this -- and you probably do to some degree. I hardly think giving out a list of journals that review a few young adult novels is going to get you off the hook-- and this is probably the typical method of teaching review sources. Why do I stress this? First, knowing the vast number of review sources, not that an English teacher can read them all, gives the already over-burdened classroom English teacher some grasp on this ever-changing body of literature. Short of reading all the books it helps the teacher be selective but at the same time know new books, new authors, and new themes and topics.

Non-book materials

The third aspect, the failure to devote any time to the use of non-book materials, is perhaps understandable. The commercially prepared materials, if they exist at all for English programs, are at best mediocre and usually heavily classics oriented for literature. However, the survey again indicated the lack of any real effort to have non-book materials part of the adolescent literature class. Fewer than 9 of the 61 courses examined listed

non-book materials as a part of the course.

Now that new and exciting materials based on many outstanding young adult novels are appearing on the market, I think it is time for perspective English teachers to be made aware of these materials and the potential use of them in the classroom. Some effort on utiliting these filmstrips, records, cassettes, and videos should become part of the course offering in an adolescent literature class. Both the use of and reviewing the materials and sources of media reviews should become part of the adolescent literature class. Preparing these materials, such as slide-tape shows and videos, is a natural out-growth of becoming familiar with these assorted non-book materials.

Teaching the Young Adult Novel

The fourth aspect is how to utilize and to teach young adult novels in the classroom. Again the survey indicates that fewer than 5% of the adolescent literature classes devote much part of the course to teaching strategies. Why introduce students to this body of literature and then make little attempt to show them how to use it? Will they not apply all the same teaching techniques -- literary analysis, plot, character, theme analysis techniques used in their English courses to these novels? And indeed, these books are different -- Zindel's Pigman and Crawford's Letter Perfect, and Glen Le Roy's Cold Feet are teachable books but certainly require somewhat different techniques than Great Expectations, Silas Marner or The Mayor of Casterbridge. Students need specific models to provide guidelines for teaching the young adult novel.

I realize that in most cases teachers of adolescent literature courses get only one shot at these novice beginners. You feel compelled to get the

students to read a wide variety of young adult literature both current and past titles. You want to give them a sense of the history of adolescent literature by having them read not only Paul Zindel, Judy Blume, and M.E. Kerr's novels but also to read Betty Cavanna, Henry Felsen, and Rose Mary Dujardin. You want students to realize the nature of the audience so you have them read background reading on the developing adolescents and even bibliotherapy. You want your students to be prepared to deal with problems of censorship, stereotypes, and hack writing in young adult literature. Admittedly, you are already doing more than both you and your students can probably cope with. I don't have a simple solution for integrating these four aspects into an adolescent literature course -- because there is none. But I do maintain that there exists a vacuum in many adolescent courses that makes it more difficult for English teachers to excite students, to stimulate, to motivate, and to teach students to become life-long readers, not just cereal-box-newspaper readers. English teachers need to know how to get reluctant students, avid readers, and unmotivated students to read. English teachers foster reading because it provides the impetus for them to get students to realize the vast experiences through literature that can elevate their daily lives. But most often, the most experienced English teachers I have observed and especially the beginning English teacher are not equipped to deal with this awesome goal of making life-long readers of their students.